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VALEDICTORY ADDRESS,

TO THE

STUDENTS IN MEDICINE

OF THE

COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS

OF THE

UNIVERSITY

OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK.

Delivered, Feb. 28, 1839.

BY JOHN B. BECK, M. D.,

PROFESSOR OF MATERIA MEDICA AND MEDICAL JURISPRUDENCE IN THE COLLEGE OF
PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
THE STATE OF NEW YORK.

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COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS.

NEW YORK, February 28th, 1839.

JOHN B. BECK, M. D., AND P.

SIR :—At a meeting of the Students of the College, held this day, it was unanimously resolved that a committee of five, with the addition of the Chairman and Secretary, be appointed to present the cordial thanks of the class to you, for your masterly analysis, and exposition of the necessity of mental discipline in the pursuit of medical excellence. It was (on motion of Mr. Greacen.)

Resolved, That the Committee appointed wait on you, and respectfully request a copy of your able and appropriate Valedictory Address for publication.

We, the undersigned Committee appointed for this purpose, take great pleasure in making known to you the wishes of the class, and earnestly desire that you may find it convenient to comply with their request.

Respectfully yours,

JAMES R. GREACEN, JOHN OSBORN, PINCKNEY W. ELLSWORTH, FREDK. J. PAINTER, RICHARD HOFFMAN COOLIDGE, NATH. L. LIGHTBOURN, <i>Chairman</i> , BENJ. J. RAPHAEL, <i>Secretary</i> .	}	Committee.
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NEW YORK, March 4th, 1839.

14 LE ROY PLACE.

GENTLEMEN :—The address, delivered at the close of my course of Lectures, was prepared without the remotest idea of being published. Believing, however, that it contains some suggestions that may be useful to you, and feeling a deep interest in your welfare, I cheerfully comply with your request. With every wish for the happiness and prosperity of yourselves and of the gentlemen whom you represent,

I remain your

sincere friend,

JOHN B. BECK.

TO MESSRS. JAMES R. GREACEN, JOHN OSBORN, PINCKNEY W. ELLSWORTH, FREDK. J. PAINTER, RICHARD HOFFMAN COOLIDGE, NATH. L. LIGHTBOURN, <i>Chairman</i> , BENJ. J. RAPHAEL, <i>Secretary</i> .	}	Committee.
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VALEDICTORY ADDRESS.

GENTLEMEN,

Another session has come to its close. Another academic year, with all its interests, its toils, its fears and its hopes, has terminated. Occasions like this are pregnant with interest to us all. To the teacher it is so, as he sees another class of ingenuous and industrious youth pass from before him, many of whom he may never see again. To him it would cause a deeper regret, were it not for the hope, that he may in after time hear of them again, as the ornaments of society and of the profession. To the student it is interesting, because he has closed another period of the only time allotted to him, in which he is to lay the foundation of his future character. Under the influence of feelings like these, I cannot consent to take my leave of you, without offering some suggestions of a general nature, that perhaps may be

useful to you, and I propose, to give you some considerations in relation to the means, by which your future professional eminence may be promoted.

The first idea that I would present to you, is the importance of a well disciplined mind. When I speak of a well disciplined mind, I do not mean mere natural ability ; but I allude to that intellectual cultivation, which is the result of study and training upon a mind capable of improvement ; in other words, it is the cultivation of mind, which flows from a thorough education in the various preliminary branches of human study. Of the necessity and importance of such mental discipline, there can be little question. The mind of man is naturally feeble and imperfect. Susceptible of boundless improvement, if left to itself, it makes little or no advance in knowledge. Uneducated, untutored man is little superior to the beast of the forest. Daily sustenance is the object of his toil, and the gratification of passion, the summit of his enjoyment. In the rudest states of existence, education is unknown, and there, we find the human mind in its lowest state of degradation. If we leave these, and ascend through all the intermediate grades of society, we shall find, that just in proportion as the means of education are afforded, is the

human mind elevated, expanded, and refined; and just in proportion as these are withheld, is it grovelling and debased. Without any extended process of reasoning, it is evident that the mind requires to be educated. Like the body, it must pass through a long course of discipline, before its faculties are matured, and before it can become a fit agent for the accomplishment of the great ends for which it was destined. If this be so as a general fact, how much more strikingly does its truth appear, when we come to view it in its applications to the various pursuits of life, and especially those of a professional character. The undisciplined mind, however vigorous its native powers may be, is inadequate to the successful cultivation of knowledge as embodied in these pursuits. The whole history of human experience goes to show that no original genius, however great, can ever supply the deficiency occasioned by a want of discipline and study. In no profession, perhaps, is all this more strikingly illustrated than in that of medicine. Here, the object is pre-eminently the investigation of truth, not by flights of fancy, not by visionary theories, but by patient observation, by the laborious comparison of facts, and by the nice balancing of evidence. Now it is self-evident, that no progress can be made in such a pro-

cess as this, unless by a mind properly cultivated. Such being the case, the question naturally arises, how is this intellectual cultivation to be attained? I answer, only by a sound education on general subjects as preliminary to an entrance upon professional studies. Strange as it may appear, there is no subject perhaps on which a greater difference of opinion has existed, than on that of preliminary education, and particularly in relation to the kinds of study which ought to be pursued. This discordance, appears to have arisen in a great measure from the true object of this kind of education not being correctly understood. By some, the sole object is supposed to be the mere acquisition of knowledge. Hence it is, that you will find men, even of intelligence, advocating the principle, that the youthful mind ought to be instructed chiefly in such branches of information, as may be made practically useful in the various occupations of life. Accordingly, Botany, Zoology, Mineralogy, and the like, are gravely advocated as the best suited for the purposes of early instruction. Now, without wishing to derogate in the least from the value of these departments of science, for no man appreciates them more highly than myself, I cannot but believe this to be a great and serious error. If the design of general education were simply

to perfect young men in one branch of knowledge, then indeed some plausible foundation for this doctrine might exist. This, however, is not the case. It is not to make men merely zoologists, or botanists, or mineralogists, but to evolve and mature the mental faculties, in such way, that they may be prepared for applying them advantageously, to whatever pursuit or profession the taste or genius of the individual may afterwards lead him. If this be so, then there can be no question that this object can be best accomplished by studies altogether of a general nature, and without reference to any special department of science. With regard to the kind of studies best suited for this purpose, the opinion of mankind has long since been definitively expressed, and the experience of the world has decided that language, mathematics and mental philosophy hold the highest rank. The usage of every civilized nation has given its suffrage in favor of these studies, and however much the taste of the day may seem to fluctuate, I do not doubt but they will continue to retain, to the remotest time, the high rank which they have ever held. In the study of language, and more especially of the dead languages, there is every thing calculated to call into exercise the mental faculties. Not merely the memory, but

the fancy, the judgment and the reasoning powers are roused into action. Taught, not by a pedagogue, whose sole object is to convert one language into another, but by a master capable of reflection and generalization, fountains of knowledge are continually opened before the youthful mind, and he becomes insensibly familiarized with the history of human thought and human conduct, as it has been handed down to us in these treasures of ancient genius. In the mathematics, he has the purest forms of reason submitted to him. Starting from axioms, or self-evident truths, he learns that most important of all acquisitions in reason, to take nothing for granted. He sees how truth is connected with truth like the links of a chain—how one proposition follows another—how conclusions succeed their premises, until the whole winds up in the glorious certainty of demonstration. In mental philosophy, the student becomes acquainted with his own intellectual powers and capacities, and he becomes familiarized with forms of discussion and reasoning of more general application than those of mere demonstrative science.

Now, the object of these studies is not to make a young man either a linguist, or a mathematician, or a metaphysician; their object is to *educate* the mind, to evolve and strengthen the mental powers;

and in this view their efficiency is unrivalled ; they instruct, they liberalize, they ennoble the mind in a way which the study of any single science can never do.

Such being the object of preliminary education, there can be no question of its importance to the student of medicine. Thus trained and fortified, he will come up to the study of medicine, with immense advantages over one who has never enjoyed the benefits of such discipline ; and as he advances in his studies he will find daily illustrations of the facilities which he will possess in the acquisition of professional knowledge.

But I will not dwell upon this subject. Most of you have had the benefits of a liberal preliminary education, and no doubt justly appreciate its value. To those of you who have not been so fortunate, I would merely say, that it is not too late yet to do something to repair the deficiency ; and you cannot do better than to appropriate a portion of your time, especially in the intervals between the lectures, in the study of the branches to which I have alluded. Should it retard your entrance into the profession for a year or two, be assured that you will not be the losers even in time. The intellectual improvement which it will impart,

will enable you afterwards to pursue your professional studies with tenfold vigor and success.

Not merely, however, ought the student who aims at distinction to have his mind properly disciplined by general studies ; but he ought to aspire to the character of a man of learning in his profession. By this, I do not mean that he should be well versed in the mere elements of his profession. This may be accomplished without much difficulty, simply by the study of a few text-books, intended to save the student the labor of thought and inquiry. Important as this kind of knowledge undoubtedly is, it is not worthy of the dignified name of learning. When I speak of learning as applied to medicine, I mean, that a man should be extensively read in the best authors who have written on the various departments of his profession. He should not confine himself to the writers of one age, or one country, or one language. In a word, he should have ranged over the whole field of professional knowledge, as he finds it embodied in the recorded labors and researches, not merely of the present, but of past generations. It is only in this way, that he can justly hope to attain to the title of true learning. In pursuing this course, it is not necessary that every book should be read, or that all books should be read with equal care.

Lord Bacon says, "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts; others, to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention." No rule is deeper laid in common sense than this. Whoever has run over, with an attentive eye, and a discriminating judgment, any portion of professional literature, cannot but be forcibly impressed with the fact, that a large proportion of writers are the mere copyists of those who have preceded them. In a thousand different shapes and ways, the same materials are wrought up, to suit the existing taste of the day, without the addition of a single new idea. It is only now and then, and at immense intervals too, that a work of profound and original merit bursts upon the view. Now, the practised student, and the man of disciplined understanding, will, almost at a glance, be able to seize upon the true value of a book, and extract from it what may be essentially useful. In this way, a labor apparently endless and hopeless, comes within the reach of ordinary industry and capacity.

You will doubtless meet with many, even in our own profession, who will endeavor to persuade you that learning is of no great impor-

tance ; you will be told that it may be an accomplishment, but nothing more ; that some of the best practitioners never read. Such notions as these are exceedingly prevalent, and unfortunately, exercise an influence most extensive and fatal. They cannot, therefore, be too early counteracted. With regard to the objection, so startling at first, that good practitioners never read, I need not stop to tell *you* how mistaken such an opinion is. If the origin of it be traced, it will be found to proceed from men who wish to use it as an excuse for their indolence, or a cloak for their ignorance. You might as well say, that a man may be a good practitioner who never thinks. Learning supplies the materials for thought, and the one is just as necessary to make even the good practitioner as the other. If you enlarge your views of the physician, and consider him not merely as the practitioner, but as aiming at the extension and improvement of medical science, the importance of learning becomes still more apparent. It is only in this way, that he can become acquainted with what has been actually done by those who have gone before him, and unless he possess this kind of knowledge, he will continually be placed in the unenviable light of promulgating discoveries which have been made centuries before. Time and labor

will thus be wasted in vain. But it is not merely knowledge that he will thus acquire. As he peruses the writings of the great masters who have advanced our science, he will make an acquisition still more valuable. He will become familiarized with their modes of thinking, and with the modes in which they investigated, and ultimately arrived at the discovery of truth, and this is the capital advantage of studying the great and original authors in our profession. A summary of what these men wrote or discovered may easily be obtained from a common dictionary or encyclopedia, but this is not what you want merely. You want to study the mind and genius of the men, as displayed in the investigation and exhibition of truth. You want to do, what the artist does, when he travels to foreign lands to study the great models of sculpture and architecture, in the hope that he may catch some of the spirit and genius of their authors. What I would then urge is, that you should not be content merely with the results of learning, as recorded in text books, but aspire to become familiar with the modes in which great minds attained to these results. In doing this, do not confine yourselves to the moderns. Improved as medicine is at the present day, you will nevertheless find in the older writers, much to reward all the la-

bor which you may expend upon them. You will find unrivalled descriptions, extensive observations, and ingenious reasonings. Even from their errors, you may extract much profit. You will find what the causes were, why men of such acute genius frequently erred, and how their errors have been corrected, by the introduction of a subsequent and sounder philosophy. Every student, then, who aims at future pre-eminence, ought to make up his mind, to go through an elaborate course of reading and study of the great masters of our art. The only way to accomplish this is to begin early. Youth is susceptible of impression and improvement, and it is then that the mind can receive its bias from study. Nor should the moral influence of such a course be overlooked. In taking up the writings of an author who has stood the test of time, and whose renown has only been augmented by the lapse of years, the student feels as if he were on hallowed ground, and his mind must inevitably become elevated and improved.

To accomplish all this, another thing is essential—the student who aspires to eminence should be a man of industry. There is no opinion more fatal to excellence in any pursuit, than that it is the result of mere genius or natural talent ; that it can

be acquired by the voluntary effort of mere native power. Among the young, this is an idea unfortunately too apt to be prevalent. Hence it is that the opinion has grown up among them that industry and genius are incompatible, and when a young man is found attentive and laborious, it is too often looked upon as an evidence of dulness. Now, although mere industry is no proof of talent, it is certainly no proof of dulness. So far from this, it certainly indicates a decision of mind, which, if it be not perverted or counteracted, must sooner or later lead to some useful result. If it be not the evidence of genius, it is the evidence of the possession of other qualities, equally, if not more necessary to ultimate success. If young men generally estimated this fact, they would not so often be led astray by the foolish and fatal notion that industry and study will expose them to the charge of dulness. It is a law of our nature, that, to accomplish any thing good or great, labor is essential. Gifted as men are with different original powers, one man can accomplish projects with greater facility and greater excellence than another. All, however, must labor more or less, and the greatest geniuses are those who labor the most. The man who imagines that the great monuments of art, fancy, and imagination, which have been handed

down to us, are not the results of great labor and toil, only betrays his ignorance. If this be so of efforts more purely creative and imaginative, and when a man may call upon his own mind in a great measure for his resources, how much more strikingly true is it of such a profession as medicine. A knowledge of this cannot be gained by intuition, or by mere reflection. It is a science based upon profound personal observation, combined with an extensive knowledge of what has been observed and recorded by others, and the whole practically applied by experience. Now, how is all this to be attained, without immense labor? If you want any illustration of the necessity of this, look at the history of those men who have signalized themselves in our science. See how days and nights, health and pleasure, have been sacrificed at the shrine of industrious labor, and, unless the student emulate these illustrious exemplars, he can never hope to distinguish himself in the annals of our art.

But, gentlemen, the student of our profession will find all his intellectual discipline, all his varied learning, all his labor, of no avail, unless he give them a proper direction. Unless he direct them solely and devotedly to the investigation and establishment of *truth*, they will serve but to dazzle and

bewilder, and leave no lasting monument behind them. In the early period of his existence, comparatively unacquainted as he is with the world and with man, he may think it strange, and perhaps he may doubt, that any rational and intelligent being should be governed, in the exercise of his heaven-born faculties, by any other motive than the love of truth. A few years of melancholy experience, however, will convince him that other influences exercise a predominant control over the human mind, and that a thousand agencies are continually tempting it from the path of truth. In this way it is, that the whole of man's moral and intellectual nature has become corrupted. The whole history of the human race, from our great progenitor down to the present day, furnishes a painful but faithful illustration of the correctness of this assertion. In our profession, the student will find a thousand causes operating to divert his mind from the love and pursuit of truth, and it is against these that he ought to be fortified. At one time, he may find the authority of some great name raising its oracular voice to crush inquiry; at another, he may find the intolerance of sect or party attempting to stifle honest and manly thought; at another, he may find the love of distinction tempting to the promulgation of some brilliant theory, which, how-

ever false and dangerous, may yet gain for its author the distinction of a temporary notoriety. It is thus that truth has been obscured, and error rendered perennial in our profession. Now, against all these causes, the youthful votary of medicine should be especially on his guard. With a modesty, which is the grace of every age, but the especial ornament of youth, he ought to treat with all becoming respect the labors and researches of those who have gone before him, as well as those of his cotemporaries. But, while he reads and investigates them, he should not blindly receive all they say. His reason and his growing experience should continually sit in judgment. In short, he should always *think for himself*, and let *truth*—simple, unsophisticated truth, apart from authority, and sect, and every thing else—be his polar star.

Before leaving this point, permit me to caution you emphatically against that vice so prevalent in our profession, of attaching yourselves to some popular sect or party. Once joined to a sect or party, a man's independence is gone. He loses the distinctive character of the honest inquirer after truth ; he loses his freedom of thought and action, and too often, becomes the humble drudge of some deluded visionary, or, what is worse, of some designing impostor. The character is thus frequently

settled for life. Should he see his folly, and by a noble effort disenthral himself, it will take long years of painful and humiliating exertion to efface its effects. More generally, however, he persists in his error, and sinks deeper and deeper in degradation. Many a noble youth, starting on his career with high hopes and brilliant prospects, has thus been prematurely shipwrecked.

Again, if you wish to acquire distinction, cultivate an enthusiastic love of your profession. Unless you do this, all your aspirings after fame will prove abortive. Independently of this consideration, you have every inducement to do so. Than medicine, there is no department of human labor which is more interesting in itself, or more generous in the ends which it proposes to itself. It ranges over the illimitable fields of nature—it looks to the heavens—it traverses the globe—it climbs the mountain—it dives into the solid earth—it interrogates man himself in his mysterious recesses; and it brings all its treasures to its votaries, for the noblest of purposes; to alleviate human distress—to arrest the progress of disease—to dispel the mists of clouded intellect—in short, to make man a happier and more grateful tenant of this lower world. If you entertain such views of your profession, it cannot be

otherwise than that you will make corresponding efforts to add something to the amount of our knowledge and means to accomplish these sublime objects; and if you do so, you cannot fail to receive your reward.

But it is not merely necessary that the man who enters our profession should love the science in the abstract; he must also respect his professional brethren. Our profession, like every other, contains a mixture of good and evil. There are some, who by their misdeeds have forfeited all esteem. But all are not such. Our profession contains a mass of intelligence, and worth, and virtue, which he is bound to appreciate, if he ever hope to succeed. This he is bound to do, no less by the obligations of duty than from a regard to his own interest. He should recollect, that the character of the profession is a part of the inheritance of every individual member of it, and just in proportion as that is elevated or degraded, does the humblest individual who belongs to it rise or sink in importance. There are some so unfortunately organized, that they think the only method of gaining importance is by traducing others and rising upon their ruins. As you value your future respectability—as you value the opinion of the honorable and virtuous—and, above

all, as you value your own peace of mind, do not emulate their vicious example. Retributive justice sooner or later overtakes such men. The victims of envy and jealousy, their whole moral nature becomes depraved to the core, and they become the prey of the unholy fires which themselves have kindled. As they go through life, they cast a baleful influence around them, and at last they pass from the scene unhonored and unregretted. On the other hand, if you trust to your own merit—if you give to all their due—if you cast the mantle of charity over their deficiencies—you will not fail to reap a rich harvest of grateful feeling from all around you.

There are innumerable other considerations, gentlemen, which I might urge upon you, did time permit, all of which would tend to enhance your future respectability. I might speak to you of the importance of cultivating a stern integrity of character—of a chaste and temperate life—of the subjugation of your passions—of your moral and religious duties. All of these are so many beautiful and essential elements entering into the formation of a character that is destined to exert a salutary and ennobling influence over society.

But I have done. In what I have said, I have spoken to you in the honesty of truth, and the sin-

cerity of friendship, and no one will feel a purer thrill of joy in hearing, in after time, that you are fulfilling, with honor to yourselves, the high destinies to which you are aspiring.

THE END.

